

PRWeek

JULY 24, 2009

WWW.PRWEEKUS.COM



MICHAEL LASKY

Social media guidelines and why you need them to do business

Public relations firms are quickly trying to develop appropriate social media guidelines in order for their employees to use (and not misuse) tools such as Facebook, blogs, and Twitter. This article highlights the key principles that all firms should keep in mind, although social media guidelines should be customized based on a firm's own culture and risk tolerance.

Social media guidelines should be prepared by legal counsel and signed or accepted by all employees as a condition of their continued employment. Here are four points that should be incorporated into any firm's social media guidelines:

Respect for intellectual property. Plagiarism was wrong in grade school and it is just as wrong when blogging. It is acceptable – even preferable – to develop messages reacting to other people's ideas. However, make sure employees give proper attribution to the ideas of others when they are blogging. Direct quotes from other sources should be used sparingly to avoid accusations of copyright infringement.

Standards of truth. Before quoting any facts, consider the source of those "facts" in the same way you would for any other type of writing. Ask yourself if there is substantiation to make a certain claim or statement in cyberspace with the same diligence for a statement made in a press release. The ease of social media pulls people toward a relaxation of standards. This urge must be resisted.

Confidentiality. It's easy to breach in social media. A PR firm may be pitching new business, discussing rate increases, or discussing new business with a client. A good rule-of-thumb question to ask before posting anything is, "Would I share this information with our competitors?" If the answer is no, don't post it.

Social media and common sense. Social media doesn't grant a special shield or defensive bubble surrounding its users. We've all read about the client relations disasters associated with ill-considered tweets and Facebook status updates that cannot be removed once posted. A good point in all social media guidelines is the idea that employees are still held to the same standards of common sense and etiquette using social media that they are in other avenues of communication.

These key points are similar to the way PR firms operate in print media and were reiterated in the "old days" when we all first got accustomed to the Internet. Now, with the Internet evolving with the proliferation of social media, the application of the rules must be reconsidered. Regardless of the excitement surrounding social media, we should not lose sight of the fact that the underlying issues and responsibilities have not changed. ■

Michael Lasky is a senior partner at the law firm of Davis & Gilbert LLP, where he heads the PR practice group and co-chairs the litigation department. He can be reached at mlasky@dglaw.com.